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THE HYPERBOLICAL TEACHINGS OF JESUS.

BY W. G. BALLANTINE.

CAN any of the practical questions of society be settled mechanically and infallibly, without the labor of observing facts or the responsibility of forming a judgment, by simply opening the Bible? Is Divorce such a question? There is a widespread impression that it is.

In a recent number of "Harper's Weekly," the Rt. Rev. William Crosswell Doane, D.D., Bishop of Albany, expressed himself as follows:

"There is a grave question, and the question is growing graver, whether there is any Scriptural sanction for dissolving the bond of marriage for any cause whatever. But there is no question that the Scriptures do not recognize any cause except adultery as making a divorce possible. In all other cases it must be only a separation. My own conviction is that the bond is indissoluble except by death. Surely the Christian sentiment of thoughtful men might come to feel the danger of going beyond the letter of Scripture. This would considerably reduce the frequency of divorce, although it would still leave untouched the scandal of collusion, and the difficulty of finding what is called the innocent party in a divorce suit."

In so speaking, the distinguished Bishop voiced, with unusual clearness and impressiveness, a sentiment rapidly growing among Christian people. Similar expressions have been coming fast from other eminent religious leaders and from ecclesiastical bodies of many denominations. Startled by frequent scandals in "high life" and the steady increase of divorces among all classes, the national conscience calls for emphatic reaffirmation of the sacredness of the marriage tie.

But is there not a danger that, in following the letter, we may miss the spirit of Jesus, and by a Draconic severity make a bad matter worse? The assumed principle that it is dangerous for

Christian men "to go beyond the letter of Scripture" may lead to embarrassing consequences. The inquiry arises how it is known that the words of Jesus in this regard were meant to be understood as legislation. It would be unfortunate to sound the bugle for a united stand upon impossible ground.

Jesus used an extraordinary rhetoric. For he had a unique purpose. It was nothing less than to give spiritual liberty to a world bound hand and foot in the grave clothes of Talmudic literalism. He refused to be made a judge or divider among men. His was a far more exalted and spiritual and permanent function. During his whole life, he fought against the tyranny of mere words, and for the lordship of the present living spiritual man. In his discourses he suggested great truths by parables, by questions, by metaphors, by paradoxes, by hyperboles, by every device that could elude the semblance of fixed judicial formulas. It is the irony of history that such language should be seized upon for statute law. Jesus did not intend to save us from the trouble or the responsibility of dealing with concrete situations, but he did intend to give us the heavenly point of view.

Even the hastiest reader of the Gospels sees that Jesus, in his teaching, constantly used the rhetorical figure which is called Hyperbole, a figure the most unsuitable conceivable for the language of laws. The word "hyperbole," derived from two Greek words meaning *to throw beyond*, is defined in the Century Dictionary as "an extravagant statement or assertion not intended to be understood literally." Jesus apparently aimed to startle into thought the most indolent people, and to infix his suggestions into the memories of the most forgetful. His remarks often lack wholly the characteristics of careful definitions, and seem rather, as Matthew Arnold so well expressed it, "words flung out" toward great ideas.

Whatever may have been the reason for using this surprising rhetorical figure, it undeniably abounds in the discourses of Jesus. It makes all attempts at consistent literalism hopeless, and it leaves the reader in many cases at a loss for any explanation. Men who are going to argue from the sayings of Jesus, and to plead with churches and states to erect those sayings into laws, should first survey this whole field of hyperbole and fix upon some consistent and thorough-going method of treating it. It would be no more unreasonable to take Emerson's motto, "Hitch your wagon to a

star," as a prosaic direction to teamsters, and to paint it on a board alongside of "Walk your horses" and "Keep to the right," than to take the sublime hyperboles of Jesus for laws.

It is the purpose of this paper to consider enough of the words of Jesus to make it plain that nobody takes all of them in their bald, literal sense, that most Christians treat a large part of them as figurative, and that it is purely a matter of human judgment which, if any, shall be enforced as practical rules. Such being the case, the mere opening of the Gospels to the utterances of the Master concerning divorce cannot settle for us what should be the law of our land. Nothing can relieve us from balancing the interests at stake; and at the end we must decide, at our peril, whether the letter of Scripture is the right law for America to-day. This is a responsibility that cannot be shirked.

Jesus said: "If any man come to me, and *hate* not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple" (Luke xiv., 26). This is most extraordinary language in regard to entrance upon a life of love. A young Christian worker, an assistant-secretary of the Young Men's Christian Association, once expressed to the writer a great desire to study the Greek language, and he mentioned this text as a reason. He was sure that the Greek word "to hate" must have some occult meaning not belonging to its English equivalent. The positive assurance that hate in Greek was just the same as in English left him unconvinced. He could not hate his wife in the plain English sense of the word.

Jesus said: "There are some eunuchs, which were so born from their mothers' womb: and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men: and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it" (Matt. xix., 12). All students of church history know that the greatest of Alexandrian biblical scholars, the illustrious Origen, accepted this passage literally, and acted upon it. But the church of the third century rejected his interpretation and condemned this "inconsiderate and misdirected heroism," as he himself also did in riper years.

Jesus said: "If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell. And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and

cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell" (Matt. v., 29, 30). But no one of us would encourage a young man, who, finding temptation through the eye dangerous to purity, should propose to destroy his own sight, or who should, under any circumstances, amputate his right hand. These suggestions of self-mutilation strike us as so manifestly hyperbolic that we are wholly at a loss to understand the infatuation of the monks and nuns, the penitents and pillar-saints, of the centuries of asceticism. Uncounted thousands of Christians could say with Saint Simeon of the pillar:

"Bear witness, if I could have found a way—
And heedfully I sifted all my thought—
More slowly-painful to subdue this home
Of sin, my flesh, which I despise and hate,
I had not stinted practice, O my God."

Those poor, deluded, self-torturing souls thought that they had the authority of Jesus for what they did.

Jesus said: "Resist not him that is evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also" (Matt. v., 39, 40). Tolstoy, the noblest living Russian, in genius and in heart, takes these commands literally. He teaches that we should act upon them and leave the results with God. Fortunately, he has a wife, who, if open to the charge of worldly-mindedness, has certainly ordinary common sense, and thus the grand old idealist is protected from want. To the mass of Christian men the thought of allowing the criminals and ruffians of the world to seize our property, reduce us to destitution, abuse our wives and children, and knock us about at their fiendish pleasure, seems sheer insanity. Bishop Doane, we doubt not, would be among the last to have patience with such a proposition. But it must be observed that the command of non-resistance comes in the same discourse with the utterance on divorce, which the Bishop thinks that all Christian men might see the danger of not obeying to the letter. There is nothing in the Gospel to indicate that one passage is law and that the other passage is not law. Our only way to discriminate here is to appeal to some fallible human judgment. And this is what every seeker for light will

finally come to recognize: it is not enough to know the words of Jesus, but among those words some bishop, commentator or ecclesiastical assembly must select for us those which literally state our duty, while the others are explained as figurative.

Jesus said: "Swear not at all" (Matt. v. 34). He made no exceptions whatever. The Quakers regard themselves as bound by the prohibition, and to them the privilege of affirmation in place of an oath has been conceded. But, in spite of the precise words of our Lord, most of us think that when Theodore Roosevelt solemnly swore to support the Constitution of the United States and faithfully to administer the great office of President, he did an appropriate and Christian thing. We take comfort in the fact that he is under oath. The fact that Jesus, in prohibiting oaths, mentioned no exception gives us no uneasiness.

Jesus said: "When thou makest a dinner or a supper, call not thy friends, nor thy brethren, neither thy kinsmen, nor thy rich neighbors; lest they also bid thee again, and a recompense be made thee. But when thou makest a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind: and thou shalt be blessed; for they cannot recompense thee: for thou shalt be recompensed at the resurrection of the just" (Luke xiv. 12, 13, 14). The language here is exclusive and it covers both dinners and suppers. Taken literally, it rules out all the pleasant dinner and supper parties among relatives and friends, which constitute so large a part of the relaxation and joy of life. Such an institution as the American Thanksgiving day, with its reunions of family circles and congenial friends around the fragrant turkey and mince pie, can no longer be countenanced by Christian people. Social feasting is permissible only with defectives and dependents.

Jesus said: "Call no man your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven" (Matt. xxiii. 9). Here one of the most tender and beautiful titles in the home is absolutely forbidden. Every time a little child says "*father*," he violates the letter of this command. Every time we lovingly bestow this title on some venerable minister of Christ, we disobey the words of the Master.

Jesus said: "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God" (Matt. xix. 24). The unwearied attempts of commentators to diminish the size of the "camel" here, or to enlarge the "needle's

eye," can only excite a smile. Sometimes we are told that the camel was a rope, and sometimes that the needle's eye was a gate through which a camel, by getting down on his knees, could pass,—anything, to escape, if possible, the astounding hyperbole.

Jesus said: "Sell that which ye have and give alms" (Luke xii. 33). The notion that a Christian must give away all and enter upon a life of poverty is based upon numerous similar unqualified assertions and commands. The opinion that a Christian should retain his property and administer it for God must be supported upon implications and inferences. Here, as in other matters, the path of duty is not ascertained for us by the precise words of Christ, but by our own judgment of what, in our circumstances, he would approve.

Jesus said: "Give to him that asketh thee" (Matt. v. 42). He made no exceptions. Josiah Flynt has told us that there is, or was a few years ago, in the United States, an army of 60,000 idle and depraved tramps, supported in their filth and wickedness by the unintelligent kindness of Christian people. As a rule each one of these tramps secures by begging, on the average, three "square" meals and a drink of whiskey a day. Of the folly of thus maintaining these worthless creatures it is hard to speak patiently. Yet the well-meaning people who give to them are literally obeying the command of Jesus.

Jesus said: "It cannot be that a prophet perish out of Jerusalem" (Luke xiii. 33). John the Baptist, the greatest of the prophets, had just perished out of Jerusalem.

The most perplexing hyperboles of Jesus are those in which he spoke of the power of faith and prayer. He said: "If two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven" (Matt. xviii. 19). "Verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard-seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you" (Matt. xvii. 20). "If ye had faith as a grain of mustard-seed, ye might say unto this sycamine tree, Be thou plucked up by the root and be thou planted in the sea; and it should obey you" (Luke xvii. 6). "And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive" (Matt. xxi. 22). Any attempt to consider these promises literally will seem to many to savor of irreverent levity. To suggest that no Christian

would propose to remove by prayer the mountains that stand in the way of the Panama Canal or that obstruct the irrigation of the Western deserts, or would expect to transplant trees into wastes where the poor might find homes,—to say anything of this kind sounds like profane cavilling. But let us candidly face what is involved in admitting this. If the proposal to take literally certain often-repeated promises of Jesus is indignantly repelled as jesting about holy things, then is not the claim that we must go by the very letter of Scripture very much weakened?

We confess that we have difficulty in interpreting these limitless promises to prayer. President Garfield lies dying, while all the Christians of America pray for his recovery with a unanimity with which never any one man was prayed for before. But he dies. The same thing happens in the case of President McKinley. His wound does not even begin to heal. Millions die in India of famine and plague, while all the missionaries, men and women of God, surely, unite in agonizing prayer for rain and health. Slowly and with infinite anguish the human race advances along the path of progress. Consumption and cancer, ignorance and ferocity, the Czar and the Sultan continue from generation to generation. One thing is certain after two thousand years of trial. Those promises do not mean for us what their words seem to say. The common opinion is that the man who takes the words of Christ literally, and refuses to use anything but prayer for his sick child, deserves to be prosecuted for manslaughter.

One is astonished at the tone in which Jesus sometimes spoke of his own purpose and mission upon earth. He said: "I came to cast fire upon the earth; and what will I, if it is already kindled?" "Suppose ye that I am come to give peace on earth? I tell you, Nay; but rather division" (Luke xii. 49, 51). "Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace but a sword" (Matt. x. 34). "He that hath no sword, let him sell his garment, and buy one" (Luke xxii. 36). We tell the objector that Jesus in these passages, by a bold rhetorical figure, puts the unintended and lamented result for the purpose. What he means is that the wickedness of men converts his peaceful mission into a *casus belli*. None the less, in so explaining, we admit that Jesus did not literally say what he meant and did not literally mean what he said.

Even if all thoughtful Christian men were to-day united in a

resolute purpose of conformity to the letter of Scripture, the path of duty would be far from plain. Bishop Doane says: "There is a grave question, and the question is growing graver, whether there is any scriptural sanction for dissolving the bond of marriage for any cause whatever. But there is no question that the Scriptures do not recognize any cause except adultery as making a divorce possible. In all other cases it must be only a separation. My own conviction is that the bond is indissoluble except by death." Why is there a grave question, growing graver, about the scriptural sanction? It is because we are not sure what the letter of Scripture, in this case, is. The prohibition of divorce, as reported in the Gospels of Mark and Luke, makes no exception. In the Gospel of Matthew, however, Jesus is reported to have said, "Every one that putteth away his wife, *saving for the cause of fornication*, maketh her an adulteress: and whosoever marrieth her when she is put away committeth adultery." And in another passage, "Whosoever shall put away his wife, *except for fornication*, and shall marry another committeth adultery." It is hard to decide what to think of this exception in Matthew. The word "fornication" seems inappropriate and inexplicable in the connection. To many textual critics it appears more probable that some unauthorized person inserted those strange words into the manuscript of the Gospel of Matthew, than that Mark and Luke both omitted them, if Jesus really spoke them. The learned Bishop tells us that, personally, he shares that opinion. He does not believe that Jesus ever made any exception. The letter of Scripture, therefore, to which the practice of the general Christian world is to conform is not that of the true tradition as given in Mark and Luke, but the letter of what scholars, in technical language, call "a corrupt text," as given in our present imperfect manuscripts of Matthew. Such a proposal cannot excite much enthusiasm. There would still be a double standard; one for the scholarly few, the other for the unscholarly multitude.

Suppose, however, that Christians generally retain the old view that Jesus did speak the words recorded in Matthew, and that by "fornication" he meant adultery; shall they in practice apply Jesus' own hyperbolic definition of adultery? He said, "I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart" (Matt. v. 28). No court would admit evidence as to wanton looks and

secret thoughts. Literalism must stop short of this. But this hyperbolical definition of adultery is part of a paragraph that includes the supposed legislation of Jesus. If one part is treated as rhetorical and the other as legislative, it must be on our own responsibility.

Suppose, on the other hand, such a diffusion of critical learning and such a firmness of principle as to make possible a united forward movement to the high plane of Mark and Luke, would the course be then clear? By no means. We should still have the words, "What, therefore, God hath joined together, let not man put asunder." Now, to "put asunder" and to "separate" are precisely the same thing. It is merely an accident that our English translators used "put asunder" here and did not use "separate," as they did in translating the same word in other passages. For the Greek word that Jesus uses is not the legal term for divorce, but the ordinary word for parting company. In order, therefore, to escape the danger of going beyond the letter of Scripture, the law would have to require that two persons, once married, should not only never be divorced, but never for any reason *separated*. This is, manifestly, a requirement beyond the power of human nature. And at this point the practical good sense of Bishop Doane carries him right athwart the letter. He says, "In all other cases [except that of adultery] it must be only a separation." Could there be a more refreshing proof of the impossibility of consistent literalism? Start with whatever iron purpose one may, common sense somewhere breaks the chain. That which Jesus verbally forbids is just what the Bishop, in his wisdom, sees "*must be* in all other cases." Of course.

Jesus is the poorest possible authority for a literalist. He says the most unqualified things, and then never seems bound by them. Jesus said: "The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: all therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do" (Matt. xxiii. 2, 3). He said: "Verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. v. 18, 19). Language could not be more positive. Yet face to face with concrete cases, Jesus never could be made to obey the scribes or to act as a legalist. To Jesus, a law was never a formula of words,

but the ideal aim of the lawgiver. The Sabbath law, "Thou shalt not do any work," made no exceptions for deeds of necessity or mercy. But Jesus, after the most solemn proclamation that not the dot of an *i* or the cross of a *t* should pass away, could see in the Fourth Commandment no reason why his hungry disciples should not provide themselves food, or why he should not go on healing diseases. The presence of the living man for whose benefit laws are made abrogates all apparent restrictions upon that benefit. Words may take care of themselves.

The law of Moses prescribed in detail what a Jew might eat and what he might not eat. Jesus by a word brushed away two chapters of the Pentateuch, "making all meats clean"; and yet he would not admit that a jot or tittle of the law had passed. When the scribes and the Pharisees brought to him a woman taken in adultery, they thought that for once Love must side with Hate, and that he who never yet had spoken a harsh word about a woman must give leave to cruelty to have its way. The law of Moses was plain. The penalty was stoning. The proof of the crime was indisputable. But Jesus, with all his positiveness about the least commandments of the law, could see no reason, in those circumstances, why that poor woman should be stoned.

The notion that the interests of certain individuals must be sacrificed in order that the community may live under good general rules finds no support from Jesus. The sanctity of marriage and of the home in the first century did not, in his thought, demand that he should crush that wretched victim of man's impurity. Perhaps, in present conditions, the State must content itself with the imperfect justice of hard rules. But there is something out of character when Christian leaders, in the name of Jesus, cry out for laws more inexorable and indiscriminating. If Jesus were present in one of our court-rooms to-day, and a heart-broken girl should come in, pleading for release from some brute unfit to be her husband, one whom God never joined to her, and if the self-constituted defenders of the home stood around and insisted upon the letter of Scripture,—a fate worse than stoning,—may we not believe that the Master would say again: "Neither do I condemn thee: go thy way"?

To what point has our investigation brought us? To the conclusion that the teachings of Jesus have no value? Far from it. They have an infinite value. But they lie in a plane above that

of legislation. Laws must be fitted to their times. Ideals are like the stars. Jesus did not say that Moses made a mistake in giving to the ancient Hebrews a divorce law such as their low state of refinement made alone workable. It does not appear that Scripture contains ready-made rules for our use. In laying down maxims for individual conduct, and laws for church and state, we are bound only to the application of a Christian judgment to the interests involved. The belief of some Christians that they have divine sanction for their particular expedients, is a most serious misfortune for all concerned. It obstructs the cooperation of good people. It brings a confusing element into the discussion.

The Christian sentiment of thoughtful men is already pretty unanimous in feeling that, in regard to oaths, war, poor-relief, and a multitude of matters, we cannot throw off the responsibility of acting upon our own best judgment in view of existing conditions. The hyperbolical utterances of Jesus on these subjects are not looked upon as requiring, or even justifying, a mechanical conformity to the letter of Scripture. Is it too much to hope that a day will come when good men will lay aside the claim to infallibility in all other matters, and when ecclesiastical bodies will cease to clamor for the enforcement of "the scriptural rules" regarding divorce, or anything else? In that good time, all thoughtful and earnest men, meeting in the forum of fraternal debate, with the modesty becoming those consciously liable to mistake, and the courage of those strong to do the right as God gives to them to see the right, will, by courteous comparison of arguments based upon existing facts, reach such harmony in practical legislation as shall secure kindness and justice for the unfortunately married, and shall promote progress toward the ever unattainable ideals of Jesus.

W. G. BALLANTINE.